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Towards Achieving Gender Equality and Equity in the Provision of Education to the Girl Child in Selected Secondary Schools in Gwanda District

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Abstract

The study sought to establish the challenges that inhibit the full participation of the girl child in accessing education in selected secondary schools in Gwanda District of Matabeleland South Province in Zimbabwe. For this qualitative study, the descriptive survey design was used and a sample chosen through purposive sampling comprising of ten (10) school heads, ten (10) senior women responsible for the welfare of girls and one hundred and twenty (120) school girls. Data was collected through the interview technique. The data yielded the following issues as major challenges affecting the girl child's participation in education: the need to take care of ill parents, siblings and relatives, dismissal on pregnancy, parental preference for the boy child, the pressure to find employment due to family poverty, among other reasons. The study recommends, inter alia, that pregnant students be allowed to continue with their education, 'O' level girl graduands with less points than boys be allowed to proceed to 'A' level, girls be provided with contraceptives and sanitary ware so as to equalise and justify educational opportunities.

Introduction

In spite of all the tremendous efforts by feminist movements, politicians and civic organizations to fight gender inequality characterised by the dominant male and subordinate female relationship, greater challenges still lie ahead. Weiner (as cited in Moyo, 2003) argues that this relationship is manifested at every level of society: in the family, in the school, in higher education and in the workplace. Zimbabwe, as part of the global village, has not been spared from this 'scourge' of gender inequality in general, and in the provision of education in particular. The education of the girl child remains undervalued. It is therefore the intent of this study to investigate educational prejudices that bedevil the girl child in

selected secondary schools in Gwanda District. The study ultimately sought to recommend strategies which attempt to put the boy and girl child on an equal footing in the provision of education.

Background to the study

The phrase 'some animals are more important than others' by (Orwell, 2000:10) aptly denotes the unfair relationship between the privileged male and underprivileged female. In most workplaces women occupy lower positions. They perform mainly menial and clerical jobs; in the family their place is in the kitchen, and in the classroom they are prepared for motherhood. On the other hand, men are mainly in decision making positions both in the home and workplace, as the school prepares them for leadership roles.

Gender inequality is universal as it cuts across race, religion, colour or creed; it is a case of being either a male (ruler/super ordinate) or female (slave/subordinate) a clear distinction that seems to have existed since the origins of the human species. A critical analysis of gender relationships tempts one to believe in the biblical theory of creation as advanced in the book of Genesis on the origins of sin; the serpent and Eve as the architects of the sin while Adam became the victim. On judgment, Eve's sentence runs thus; 'You will bear children with intense pain and suffering. And though your desire will be for your husband, he will remain your master' (The Bible League, 1997:4). Whether one believes or not in the Biblical theory of creation and origins of sin, the stark reality is that the 'curse' has indeed remained stuck on the female folk for posterity as men have remained 'masters' while women have remained 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for men.

Figes (1994) refers to gender discrimination as a 'glass ceiling' which refers to the artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified women from advancing upward in their organization into management level positions. Worldwide efforts have been made to attain equality between the two sexes before the law in the home, at the workplace and in the education sector as well. Despite these efforts women remain dominated, overshadowed, controlled and manipulated by men across races, culture, colour and creed; hence the struggle for gender equality continues unabated until prejudice is overcame.

While political, judicial and economic institutions continue to confront the problem of gender inequality with little success, a paradigm shift has been taken by governments and multinational bodies to tackle it through education to put the girl child on an equal footing with the boy child in accessing schooling. To this end numerous conventions, conferences and summits have been convened to exchange notes and form a united front to confront the common cause of gender inequality the world over.

One such conference was the 1990 World Conference on Education for All, held in Jomtein, Thailand. More than one hundred and fifty (150) heads of states and governments across continents attended. Watkins (2000) reports that these heads of states and governments resolved that by year 2000 adult illiteracy rates would have been halved, and that measures should be taken so that all children would enjoy the right to good primary education. The same conference declared education as a fundamental basic human right and decreed all governments to have a responsibility to provide free and compulsory basic education. Today two decades later, one wonders how much has been achieved in the equitable provision of education to both male and female citizens without bias or favour. Watkins (2000) notes that ten years on, that promise has been comprehensively broken. He adds that no human right is more systematically or extensively violated by governments than the right of their citizens to basic education.

Another conference was the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2000. While the Dakar World Education Forum assessed the Jomtein achievements, it also stood as a launching pad for new, better, informed and robust strategies in educational provision between sexes across the globe.

UNESCO (2003:27) cites one of the goals of the World Education Forum in Dakar as:

... eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005 and achieving gender equality in education by 2015 with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.

The goals of the Dakar conference in 2000 revolve around gender equality in educational provision by ensuring the girl-child's full and equal access to educational participation. This resolution delimits

the problem of gender inequality and sets achievement targets for the signatories to this conference. This intention creates an enthusiasm and interest to launch an investigation into the extent to which free and compulsory basic primary and secondary education has been made accessible globally and to the girl child in particular.

Zimbabwe as a signatory to the Dakar World Education conference and other conventions, has taken great strides in democratising educational provision. Programmes such as the Universal Primary Education (UPE), tuition free primary education, the removal of sex barriers, the vocationalisation of the curriculum and the construction of both primary and secondary schools have been implemented. These reforms have seen Zimbabwe's literacy levels being the highest in Africa as a whole.

Whereas the primary school girl child has benefited in terms of both equality and equity from these various programmes including the once for free tuition and 'compulsory' primary education, the plight of the secondary school girl child has remained in limbo. In contrast, the girl child including women, have had their fair share of equity measures introduced by the government of Zimbabwe at tertiary level. Moyo (2003) identifies the following equity measures:

- in education women are now given preferential treatment with regards to promotional posts over men
- women applicants with two less points than the required minimum for admission are being considered for enrolment at the University of Zimbabwe
- maternity leave granted for students at tertiary level

The above equality and equity measures benefiting the girl child at primary school and women at tertiary levels have motivated this investigation to establish the challenges the secondary school girl child experiences in accessing educational provision in selected secondary schools in Gwanda District.

The research problem

The study sought to examine challenges experienced by the girl child in her effort to access educational provision in selected secondary schools in Gwanda District. It focused on the biases and prejudices

that bedevil the education of the girl child in comparison to those of the boy child. Home and school related factors as well as government policies are subjects of this study in as far as they influence the educational provision of the girl child. Last but not least, it attempts to discuss the equity measures meant to improve educational provision for the girl child before recommending a girl child user friendly educational environment.

Research questions

The study was anchored on the following research questions:

- i) Are there any differences in student enrolments between boys and girls?
- ii) Do boys perform better than girls in academic performance in general and in science subjects in particular?
- iii) What are the social, economic, cultural and institutional challenges faced by the girl child in accessing secondary school education?
- iv) Are there any efforts to change the mindset of the people towards the education of the girl child?
- v) What affirmative measures are accorded to the girl child at secondary school and at national levels to encourage full participation in schooling?

Definition of key terms

Equality

Arnot (as cited in Moyo, 2003) defines equality as the condition of being equal in quantity, amount, value, intensity, dignity, privileges and power. Equality of educational opportunity, therefore, refers to the same educational privileges for all students across sex, race or place of origin.

Equity

Equity refers to the 'quality of being equal, fair or impartial' Moyo (2003). It is about the affirmative /compensatory measures meant to remove the discriminatory practices which are inherent in a system.

Some equity measures in education in Zimbabwe include: the accelerated promotion of women to leadership positions, the admission of women with two less points than the requisite for enrolment at the University of Zimbabwe and the provision of special grants to poor students.

Theoretical framework

This study was based on liberal feminism standpoint on gender. Liberal feminism is rooted in the tradition of 16th and 17th century liberal philosophy which focused on the ideals of equality and liberty. In 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects', the first Western feminist theorist, Mary Wollstonecraft, argued that women's capacity to reason was equal to that of men and that biological differences were irrelevant to the granting of political rights (Gandari, Chaminuka & Mafumbate, 2010:17). Liberal feminists rest their case for equality on the premise that all people are created equal, endowed with inalienable rights to pursue life, liberty and happiness, hence the advocacy for equal rights between men and women.

These feminists do not want to change society drastically or turn society's values upside down; they just want to extend them one further step. They believe they deserve equality because they have the same capabilities as men. They argue that when work and social environments are bias free, then differences between women and men will be less problematic. Liberal feminists point out that the reason why women appeared to be intellectually inferior to men was due to their inferior education and, therefore, was a result of inequality rather than a justification for it. According to Gandari et al., (2010) liberal feminists see women's subordination as resulting from gendered norms (socialisation patterns) rather than biological sex differences.

Furthermore, liberal feminists focus on equal opportunities for women and men. Their advocacy for equal opportunities in education and before the law between men and women has motivated worldwide campaigns for women's voting and property rights.

This study was therefore anchored on this feminist theory which articulates socialisation as a source of inequality rather than biological sex differences. It further observes that women and men

are the same in terms of reasoning capabilities, hence educational provision between the girl and boy child should be bias free. This study used this theory to examine current educational practices in relation to the girl child treatment in selected secondary schools in Gwanda district so as to recommend policies which equate boys and girls rather than advantaging one against the other.

Review of related literature

Factors that contribute towards gender inequality between the boy and the girl child in educational provision

Many factors contribute to the unequal provision of education between the girl and the boy child. More often than not the girl child is found on the receiving end. Odanga and Heneveld (1995) categorize the factors as those related to institutional policies and practices; others are associated with society's customs, beliefs and attitudes about women's roles, responsibilities and capabilities. The present review analyses issues under three subheadings, socio-cultural, economic and institutional factors. The last but by no means least section examines societal attitudinal changes as a result of the massive campaigns to promote women's education worldwide hence headlined 'new perspectives in education'.

Socio-cultural factors

The current gender inequalities in educational provision can probably be traced through the patriarchal communities of the pre-historical epoch which viewed and treated women as inferior to men in all respects. Women were therefore apportioned less demanding and feminised household chores against men's demanding and masculinised roles. This philosophy has been passed down from one generation to the other through and across cultures, races and tribes to this era. Paechter (1998) contends that from the onset, the education of females is perceived as secondary in importance to that of males, and has developed in a way which both shadows and holds up a feminised mirror of the masculine-centred education system.

Socio-cultural practices have been and continue to be a stumbling block to the education of girls and women as they continue to be treated like second class citizens while males are accorded first class

status as far as educational provision is concerned. UNESCO (2003) reports that communities in North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia (Pakistan, India and Bangladesh) and East Asia (China and Republic of Korea) exhibit a strong cultural preference for sons. Gender inequalities in education in such societies are simply one aspect of generalised and systematic discrimination against women and girls. Son preference has far reaching consequences on the provision of the education of girls who are discriminated against, starved of both material and moral support, as resources are set aside for sons.

The plight of educational provision for girls is further compromised by early marriages and early pregnancies. Data from India show that in 1996 38% of girls aged 15-19 were married. In rural areas of Albania and Tajikistan it is not uncommon for poor families to endorse the early marriages of girls to lessen the family's economic burden. In these circumstances, early marriage (at age 15 or 16) becomes a reason to leave school (UNESCO, 2003).

In conjunction with early marriages, early pregnancies impinge on the girls' access and participation to education. In many countries, adolescent pregnancy, either outside or within marriage almost always results in discontinuation of a girl's schooling. In both Chile and Malawi pregnancy was often mentioned as the most important reason for girls leaving school early (UNESCO, 2003). As a panacea to this problem, many countries have come up with policies which allow girls to return to school after giving birth; however, girls feel ashamed to do so. Attar (1990) reports that in Guinea and Malawi, where girls are now encouraged to return to school after pregnancy, few do so partly because of parental fears that they would become pregnant again and partly because girls are afraid of ridicule.

Economic factors

Like socio-cultural issues, economic factors hamper the full school participation of girls. Girls, as much as their mothers, have a number of roles in the family such as caring for siblings, preparation and cooking of food, cleaning the house and fetching water and firewood. These chores can be done as domestic or hired labour hence in a number of instances girls drop out of school to look for work so as to supplement the family income. In Ethiopia and Guinea, up to a third of school dropouts said their need to earn money or to work on family farm were

the main reason for leaving school early (UNESCO, 2003:122). Besides dropping out of school to supplement family incomes, girls are also forced out of school due to scarce financial resources. Where family incomes do not adequately cater for boys and girls, the girl child becomes the loser. 'In cultures where a lower value is ascribed to the education of girls, financial pressures on families are likely to mean that female children will be the last in school and the first out in the event of hard ships' (Watkins 2000:3).

Research has shown that the cost of educating a girl is more than that of a boy. Odanga and Heneveld (1995) report that in Ghana, Guinea, Malawi and Zimbabwe, the costs associated with schooling are higher for girls than for boys; this is due in part to the higher cost of girls' uniforms. For modesty reasons, girls are less likely to go to school in torn or ill fitting uniforms unlike boys. This means girls from poor families have less chances of enrolling in school and more likely to drop out of school than boys and girls from well to do families.

Institutional factors

Institutional factors, such as security in the school, composition of the staff and subject allocation have been found to exert a strong bias on the participation of girls in education. Studies have shown that in some countries such as Ethiopia girls are sometimes 'kidnapped' by the parents of boys for marriage to their sons. The 'kidnapping' occurs when the girls are on their way to or even within the school compound itself. Cognisant of this risk, some parents refuse to send their daughters to school (UNESCO, 2003:124).

On the other hand research has shown that where there are more male than female teachers, girl child enrolment is low; and the reverse is true. Female teachers especially those in positions of authority represent role models to girls. Female teachers are also by far better placed than their male counterparts to respond to the problems faced by girls at school especially when they reach puberty. Watkins (2000) argues that the presence of female teachers also exercise a positive influence on enrolment rates for girls. Gender gaps are narrower in schools with a higher population of female teachers. Sri Lanka has the highest rate of female teacher recruitment in south Asia, and the lowest gender gap in enrolment.

General observations of subject allocation in schools in Zimbabwe show a bias towards boys who are given wider choices than girls. The unlimited choices for boys include subjects such as mathematics, science, humanities, languages, physics, technical graphics, wood work, metal work, building studies and etc. On the other hand, the limited choices for girls encompass languages, humanities, and home economics only. This shows inequality in the distribution of subjects at school, a factor that could inhibit girls' participation. This compares well with Paechter's (1998) reports of the nineteenth century practice in the U.K and the U.S.A. whereby a girl could spend half the time in her last year on domestic subjects such as needlework while boys were taught elementary arithmetic.

The factors discussed above have limited the social demand for female education in sub-Saharan Africa. Their persistence lead to the question: 'What can be done to change these biased views and perceptions that contribute to limited educational opportunities for many girls and women across the region?' Odanga and Heneveld (1995:8). In spite of this gloomy picture the future shows some light at the end of the tunnel as efforts to redeem the undesirable status quo are being intensified.

New perspectives in education

New thinking in the provision and removal of inequalities between the girl and boy child attempts at equalizing educational opportunities between the two. Campaigns have been launched and continue to gather momentum to further democratise and offer incentives to the education of girls. Many communities the world over are now realizing that educating women is of paramount importance as they actively participate in economic development. In this endeavour, laws and policies have been passed to promote the education of women and girls. For example, in Britain the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 makes direct and indirect discrimination illegal (Moyo, 2003).

The various equity or affirmative measures undertaken by various countries, such as allowing girls to return to school after pregnancy, are a welcome development as they allow girls to continue with their education rather than being sent home for good. The removal of overt and covert curriculum based biases, like offering Fashion and

Fabrics and Building Studies to both boys and girls, creates room for gender equality. This eliminates the undesirable and conservative stereotyping of domestic science (Fashion and Fabrics and Food and Nutrition) as ideal for girls and Building Studies and Technical Drawing as subjects for boys. The policy of deliberate and accelerated promotion of senior lady teachers into headship posts and allowing female students to enrol at the University of Zimbabwe and other institution of higher learning with two (2) less points than boys facilitates efforts to close the gender imbalance gaps (Moyo, 2003).

Another push factor for according women's education the respect it deserves is portrayed by Odanga and Heneveld (1995) who observe that the evidence of significant returns to female education includes reduced birth rate, reduced infant and maternal mortality, enhanced family health and welfare, improved children's education, and increased agricultural productivity earning and overall economic productivity for women and the larger economy.

Methodology

The study, being of a qualitative nature, used the descriptive survey design. Qualitative research designs according to Patton (2001) are generic investigative methodologies described as ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological field or participant observation research. This design calls for the researcher's involvement and immersion into the research by discussing that the real world is subject to change and therefore a qualitative researcher should be present during the changes to record any event after and before the change occurs.

Golafshani (2003:600) says qualitative research, broadly defined means 'any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification', and research that produces findings arrived from a real-world settings where the phenomena of interest unfold naturally.

Best and Khan (1993) are of the same view with Golafshani (2003) as they see qualitative studies as those in which the description of observations are not ordinarily expressed in quantitative terms, the researcher gathers data by participant observation, interviews and the examination of documentary materials. Patton (2001). Golafshani (2003) and Best and Khan (1993) all see qualitative methodologies as

naturalistic and context specific settings that seek to understand phenomena in their real world settings. The researcher becomes an active participant to observe and record events as they naturally unfold. There is no attempt to manipulate the phenomena of interest.

Having observed, analyzed documents and interviewed the subjects the researcher heavily relies on the use of the 'word' to explain and describe phenomena under investigation. Rukuni (2000) states that the 'qualitative data collected is linguistically based, describing the participants' experiences in detail verbally'. This design uses interviews, documentary analysis and observation among other strategies as data gathering techniques.

Data collection instruments

The study used the interview technique. The technique was chosen due to its compliance with the nature of this study. Secondly it was used because of its effectiveness and reliability in collecting valid data from the respondents. One hundred and twenty (120) pupils from 10 schools were interviewed in focus groups of 12 per school. The focus groups consisted of representatives from Forms 1-U6 including key student leaders such as the head girl, prefects and club chairpersons as opinion leaders. In addition 10 heads of schools and 10 senior lady teachers responsible for the welfare of girls were interviewed in their individual capacities.

The sample and sampling procedures

All the 28 secondary schools, the heads of schools, senior lady teachers responsible for the welfare of girls and the secondary school students in Gwanda District formed the population of the study. For manageability of the study, using the purposive sampling technique, 10 secondary schools were sampled.

Patton (1992) notes that purposeful sampling seeks information rich cases which can be studied in-depth. Information rich cases are those from which the researcher could learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the study. The study's information rich cases are the heads of schools, senior lady teachers responsible for the welfare of the girls and the girls themselves. The varied nature of schools consolidated the information rich case

element of the sample as boarding, urban day, rural day government, council and mine schools were all sampled. This allowed for the capture of diverse yet representative ideas from varied backgrounds and locations.

Findings of the study

The study results confirm a deep-rooted culture of perpetuating gender discrimination in the provision of education between the boy and girl child. The collaborated data from the three categories of respondents made up of school heads, senior women and the school girls indicate that concerted effort is still needed to equalize educational provision between boy and girl child.

Information gathered indicate that enrolment for girls is lower than that of boys in a descending trend where gaps are narrow at lower levels (ZJC), wide at 'O' level and very wide at 'A' level. One school head noted that 'comparative enrolment of girls to boys is slightly low at ZJC, becomes lower at 'O' level and lowest at 'A' level'. This means that at any given time and level there are fewer girl students than boys giving an average of low enrolment for girls compared to boys in the schools; a function of both in-attendance and dropping out.

Equally high are dropout trends where girls account for more dropouts than boys. One senior lady teacher noted that the dropout ratios are 'highest at 'O' level, low at 'A' level and least at ZJC'. She opined that girls 'become sexually active at 'O' level, coupled with the inability to cope with adolescent and puberty pressures', hence this trend. Those at 'A' level, although indulging in sexual activities, are more mature and knowledgeable on the use of contraceptives while the lower levels (ZJC) could be said to be innocent. Hence dropouts by early marriages and early pregnancies are not significant but elementary at ZJC than at 'O' and 'A' levels.

On performance in general, the study established that girls perform better than boys at ZJC with boys taking over at 'O' and 'A' levels. One senior lady teacher interviewed noted that 'generally girls perform better than boys at ZJC but slacken at 'O' and 'A' levels allowing boys to surpass them'. This means that girls apply themselves fully to their education at lower rungs of the education system where they out match boys in performance before problems associated with womanhood catch up with them at the middle and upper rungs of the

educational ladder thus rendering them no match to boys. The senior lady teacher observed that 'as though by design, this scenario persists in performance in subjects such as Science and Mathematics in which girls distinguish themselves well at ZJC level but falter at 'O' and 'A' levels when boys take over'. Hence boys emerge as engineers, doctors and artisans while girls specialize in service professions such as teaching and nursing and other related courses (Odanga & Heneved, 1995).

In the home and family, girls have a multiplicity of responsibilities as compared to boys. One senior lady teacher reported that 'girls' responsibilities at home outnumber those of boys; as their household chores, besides fetching water, firewood and cooking, they also have to nurse ill parents, babies and other siblings'. Some girls are in actual fact household heads. This reason ranks highest among the other reasons for both urban and rural settings. This is further compounded by the advent of the HIV/AIDS scourge which has resulted in a high number of child headed families with the majority of them being girls. Girls and women are by nature caregivers hence the pressure to drop out of school to offer this service to needy family members at the expense of going to school. One girl from the interview group said 'girls are made to take care of the ill and invalids at home at the expense of going to school like our brothers'.

One rural school head reported that they lose a lot of girls due to 'early pregnancies and early marriages'. Early marriages and early pregnancies rank among the chief factors that militate against girls accessing and participating in schooling. Most of the respondents indicated these two as causes for concern that limit the full educational participation of girls. This is a worldwide phenomenon as child bearing is a responsibility of girls more than boys. Cases of high school dropouts by early marriages and pregnancies are also a cause for concern in Guinea, Malawi, Chile and Ethiopia (UNESCO, 2003).

The study further established that both teachers and members of the greater community have a negative attitude towards girls and their education. Teachers see girls as low achievers and hence do not give them specialised and individualised help in the course of their learning. This negative perception results in girls losing confidence and self esteem. To make matters even worse teachers, school ancillary staff and boys propose love to them; a situation that creates friction between the girls and their suitors resulting, in among other

vices, school girl pregnancies and dropouts. One girl from the focus groups decried that 'girls suffer in silence as boys and teachers propose love to us with limited options of turning them down for fear of victimization' and noted that girls have dropped out due to 'pregnancies by members of staff'. The communities also view girls as their cash cows as parents or guardians can claim 'bride prize' for a married girl. Their education is not valued much; hence both covert and overt means are used to suppress their schooling on the premise that after all they will be married and be dependent upon a husband who is the bread winner. This gives rise to the preference for the son as is the practice with communities in Pakistan, India, Korea, China, Bangladesh and countries in north and sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2003; Watkins, 2000; Odanga & Heneveld, 1995).

The negative attitude of the communities towards the education of the girls subsequently affect its funding negatively; hence respondents indicated lack of proper uniforms and stationery as factors negatively affecting girls' schooling. The same goes for the payment of tuition and other related financial obligations; hence dropouts due to lack of financial assistance are higher among girls than boys. One girl from an interview group reported that a number of girls dropped out of school 'due to lack of financial assistance as parents look down upon the education of girls in favour of education for boys'. Watkins (2000) reports that in a culture where a lower value is ascribed to girls' education, in the event of economic hard ships, financial pressures on families are likely to mean that female children will be the last in and yet the first out of school.

Financial pressures also result in girls dropping out of school in order to look for paid jobs in order to supplement family incomes. The study established that girls drop out of school to be employed as flea market stall attendants, or as vendors selling sweets, freezie drinks, pots and pillows among other wares. A girl from an interview group reported that many girls drop out of school to 'supplement household incomes by selling sweets and freezie drinks among other wares while boys continue with their schooling'. This reason had a high frequency among urban communities whose livelihood is strongly dependent upon vending or on a daily cash income. In the same vein the rural respondents indicated the need for domestic labour; thus girls drop out of school to be engaged in hired or family labour. This was stated by a girl who said some of her friends have been denied

schooling as their 'parents needed their domestic labour in the homes'. UNESCO (2003) reports that in Ethiopia and Guinea, up to a third of school dropouts said their need to earn money or work on family farm were the main reason for leaving school early.

Among the subsidiary reasons were long home-school distances, lack of role models and bullying by out of school boys. Rural respondents indicated that the home-school distance contributed much to girls' inability to access schooling. One senior lady teacher reported home-school distances are 'unfriendly to the girl child as they have to trudge long distances to and from school' and in the process 'they get harassed by out of school boys', thus posing a security threat to the girls. Lack of role models was mostly cited by boarding school and urban respondents, as well as a few rural respondents. This fact indicates a high male to female teacher ratio in the schools. This becomes an inhibiting factor as a large number of female teachers in schools encourage more girls to attend (UNESCO, 2003; Odanga & Heneveld, 1995).

On measures to achieve equity being implemented by both the government and their immediate communities, respondents cited a few piecemeal efforts such as allowing pregnant girls to sit for 'O' and 'A' level examinations, availability of girls only scholarships and educational campaigns to lure and retain the girls in schools.

The majority of the respondents indicated that pregnant girls are accorded the chance to sit for their public examinations at 'O' and 'A' levels. While this is a noble step in eradicating prejudices on the education of girls, it still falls far short of the ideal situation as learning customarily takes place at school than at home. One girl from the group argued that staying at home from the time pregnancy is discovered to the time of writing examinations 'robs girls of valuable learning time thus jeopardizing chances of succeeding in these examinations'.

Some respondents, though not in the majority, indicated that there are scholarships for girls only in general and in particular to science subjects. One head of school reported that they do have 'girls only scholarships for general academic performance as well as those for science subjects in particular'. This is a positive discrimination as girls compete on their own making the competition fair and just. The fact that not all respondents affirmed to this development means that

it is only at local level. A broader and all encompassing government or national girls' only scholarship could go a long way in promoting the education of the girl child.

On educational campaign to promote the education of the girl child, only a small number of respondents reported the existence of women pressure groups in their schools and localities such as the Girl Child Network and Girls Only Interact Club as campaigners for increased access to schooling and other rights of the girl child. One girl from the group reported that the school had 'a Girls Only Interact Club which occasionally undertakes trips visiting other clubs in the locality to exchange views on the plight of the girl child's educational and related issues'. This gap shows the need for nationwide campaigns and advocacy by both the government and civic bodies so that the education of the girl child is put on an equal footing with that of the boy child.

Recommendations

In light of the above findings, the study recommends that:

- Pregnant girls should be allowed to continue with schooling until 'maternity' leave and should be allowed to continue with their education thereafter.
- Guidance and Counselling should be upgraded as a subject, time tabled and given more time in secondary schools; and the subject should have a bias towards human sexuality and reproductive health.
- O' level girl graduands with two points less than boys should be allowed to proceed to 'A' level.
- Women pressure groups and clubs step up educational campaigns on the socio-economic and political contributions of women and girls as partners to their male counterparts.
- Government, in partnership with the business and civic organizations, should introduce girls only scholarships in science subjects.
- Government programmes such as Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) be increased and be biased towards girl students.

- Girls should be provided with contraceptives and sanitary ware at school and at home.
- Teachers who propose love to school girls be dismissed forthwith.
- Government to reduce home-school distance by constructing more secondary schools in line with the home-school distance policy on primary schools.
- Population Services International (PSI), National Aids Council (NAC) and the Ministry of Health intensify campaigns on the dangers of un-protected sex which results in early pregnancies, HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).
- People in the community who abuse school girls should be prosecuted by the law.

Conclusion

The study sought to establish challenges faced by the girl child in accessing education in selected secondary schools in Gwanda District of Matabeleland South Province in Zimbabwe. Heads of schools, school girls and senior lady teachers responsible for the welfare of girls participated in the study. A qualitative methodology was used. The study revealed that the education of the girl child plays second fiddle to that of the boy child. It is under-valued and under-funded. Girls' enrolment is perennially lower than that of boys; and girls' dropout rates are higher than those of boys. The academic performance for girls is better than that of boys at the lower levels of the educational ladder, but lower than that of boys at higher levels as well as in Science subjects. The general picture is that the girl child is facing many challenges in accessing education as compared to the boy child. Serious equity measures need to be undertaken to level the educational terrain for the girl child to compete favourably with the boy child.

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